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CONFERENCE REPORT

Cities that talk: urban resistance as challenges for urban planning

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Introduction

The 8th annual AESOP Young Academics Conference Cities that Talk was held in Gothenburg, Sweden, 10–13 March 2014, in response to the emergence of a variety of contemporary forms of urban resistances that have significantly challenged traditional practices of urban planning worldwide. The discussions at the conference explored urban resistances from a broad perspective, ranging from everyday life insurgencies, through protests and riots, to urban social movements. The conference Cities that Talk attracted global attention with forty contributions selected through a competitive application process, which critically reviewed the individual papers in relation to the conference theme. In various ways, urban resistances have significantly challenged traditional practices of urban planning worldwide. They revealed how the demands of contemporary societies are no longer capable of being envisaged by current planning systems. This issue refers to the ways agencies of resistance voice their demands, request planning systems to stop the invention and authorization of particular traditions, histories, meanings, identities, landscapes and lifestyles in their cities, and demand that these systems make changes. These challenges were situated within broader discussions of ‘justice’ and in particular in connection to Lefebvre’s ([1968]1996) ‘right to the city’, Harvey’s (2008) ‘social justice and the city’, and Swyngedouw and Merrifield’s (1996) ‘the urbanization of injustice’. Authors also engaged with issues of heritage and identity, making contributions to Hobsbaw’n’s (1983) ‘invented traditions’, Said’s (1978) ‘orientalism and cultural prejudices’, and Anderson’s (1983) ‘imagined communities’. Issues of inclusion/exclusion within the context of place making were also debated at the conference. In this, authors were engaged with the issues of ‘urban segregation and territorial stigmatization’ (Wacquant 2007), ‘insurgent planning and the remaking of public spaces’ (Hou, 2010; Friedmann 2011) and ‘cultural representations’ and difference (Hall 1997). Finally, and closely connected to the conference theme, urban resistances, the contributions to the conference were contextualized within contemporary phenomena of urban movements, protests and riots. Case studies were investigated with theoretical and methodological inspirations: these included from squatting spaces and the institutionalization of urban movements (Pruijt 2013; Mayer 2009), rebel cities and anti-capitalist resistance (Harvey 2012), and occupy politics (Grusky et al. 2013).

Conference contributions made reference to the diversity of forms of urban resistance that have taken place in cities across the world, including Paris, London, Athens, Bombay, Hong Kong, Stockholm, New York, Cairo and Istanbul. More locally in Sweden itself, various protests and riots have evolved against gentrification and segregation in the suburbs of Stockholm, Malmö, Uppsala and Gothenburg. Sweden had not seen such unrest since the bread riots in 1917. The recent uprisings in the Stockholm suburb, Husby, where most inhabitants are unemployed and come from 'foreign' cultures, provide an example of local resistances to urban segregation and gentrification as well as sociocultural discrimination. In Gothenburg, the implementation of a development plan in the suburb of Kvillebacken has resulted in massive gentrification and displacement across the area, ignoring local voices and values. Local protests were silenced through powerful narratives framing Kvillebacken as a place of crime that people fear to visit. In the Gothenburg suburb of Backa, informal community gardening projects were seen as a mode of social mobilization against the current urban planning processes that constrain sustainable food production and urban agriculture practices. Community-based tourism in the suburb of Bergsjön, among other initiatives, has also emerged in response to the dominant tourism discourse that marginalizes stories told from the suburbs. In the calm, peaceful and well-preserved medieval town of Ystad, in south-eastern Sweden, the crime novels about the fictional character of Kurt Wallander have promoted subversive discourses encouraging those in the town to talk of crime and horror, inventing new images about the town not only among visitors but also among residents. Expounding these cases through the Young Academics conference showed how urban resistances brought the crisis of public space to the forefront of our attention pressing us to reconsider the ways cities are planned and designed as well as to rethink policies for inclusion. This process of 'rethinking' raises a multitude of questions. Questions about the role of planners and planning including: how do planners talk to cities? Do planners, architects, heritage practitioners and other policymakers tell cities what to 'say' and how to 'perform'? To what extent are sub-identities challenged or recognized by formal planning systems? Can informal urban resistances and 'politics of occupy' be institutionalized in a more responsive formal planning process? How should we understand the institutional design of planning and the role of planners in a post-policy governance setting? Linking these questions with forms of urban resistance raises further questions, which include: what sociopolitical forums and arenas are there for cities to talk? What happens when cities talk without uprisings and riots? What talks are silenced or listened to? What role does the physical environment of cities play in urban resistances? How do certain myths, fictions and ideas about cities emerge and become institutionalized in policy documents and discourses? The questions outlined above and others were explored through four independent yet interwoven tracks knitted together by the keynote addresses held each day. The four keynotes explored the specific themes of the four tracks.

Insurgencies: the 'right to the city' and the planning cultures

This theme centred upon various forms of insurgent practices aiming to influence the urban planning agenda, either at political or at implementation levels, in different urban contexts focusing on varied urban usages such as housing, public squares, open spaces and urban facilities, namely health and education. Jeffrey Hou, an associate professor and chair of Landscape Architecture at the University of Washington, USA, gave a keynote speech that focused on the potential lessons planning, and planning scholars can learn

from these insurgent practices. Hou elaborated the issue by questioning the intersections of planning with the dynamic, social and political changes in societies. In line with Hou's argument, Melissa Garcia Lamarca presented a case study, which explored the dynamics associated with the occupation of empty buildings owned by banks in Barcelona, and thus illustrated how urban insurgencies can be critically engaged through a sociospatial and political notion of insurgent practices. Similarly, presentations that addressed grass-roots movement conflicts related to urban environmental health in Belgium presented by Thomas Verbeek and an autonomous process of neighbourhood improvement by residents in San Jose, Costa Rica presented by Ignacio Castillo Ulloa demonstrated the power of insurgent practices in terms of overcoming the challenges caused by political power relations. Moreover, Lorena Melgaço Silva Marques, in her presentation, drew attention to the significance of non-hierarchical, non-geographical digital networks in terms of generating common ground for insurgencies related to different ways of solving urban conflicts. Following the discussions on lessons that can be learned from insurgent practices, Hasan Cenk Dereli, with his presentation about the recent Turkish urban protests in Taksim's Gezi Park in İstanbul, opened a discussion on the roles of architects and planners after urban revolts. An overall outcome of the discussions was the agreement on the central role (with different methods and approaches) of planning professionals and policymakers in these practices.

Cities as spaces of commons and the 'political'

Another focus of the main conference theme concerned the political and contested dimensions in the contemporary production of urban space from multiple viewpoints and approaches. Andy Merrifield is a Fellow at Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge, UK, and in his keynote lecture, he questioned how citizens can 'develop civic immunity' to the capitalistic (re)production of urban space. The contributions by Emile Seda Kayim, Tuba Ozkan and Matheus da Silveira Grandi explored recent urban social movements in Turkey and Brazil, and discussed conflicts in, and the politics of, public space. Lina Berglund Snodgrass's presentation delved into agonistic conceptions of safety in Swedish planning discourse, while Michele Vianello and Matthew Thompson focussed respectively on the Italian and British cases, debating the urban commons and their potential in reshaping planning and land-use management. These presentations stimulated a multidisciplinary debate about different conceptions of democracy and dialogic/conflictual patterns in urban space, in between the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy and communicative rationality, and agonistic conceptions stemming from the work of thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe and Hannah Arendt.

Identity and heritage politics in urban planning

This sub-theme focused on the conflicts triggered principally by top-down approaches, which promote one-way action, disregarding public empowerment in heritage conservation. In her keynote speech, Britt Baillie, an Affiliated Lecturer at the Department of Archaeology, and a founding member of the Centre for Urban Conflicts Research, University of Cambridge, UK, elaborated the ways heritage mobilized, reactivated and performed as a form of resistance. Baillie raised the question of what spatial patterns can be gleaned from

heritage as resistance. Case studies on urban heritage preservation in Sijie, China, presented by Yingwen Tao and on the postcolonial anxieties embedded in the theatres of dissent in Kuala Lumpur, presented by Nurul Azlan, revealed that the priorities of those in positions of political power might themselves be the source of a threat for the sustainability of heritage values. On the other hand, Prihadi Nugroho, in his presentation about the empowerment of traditional home-based industry, and Mohamed Khalil, in his presentation about the damages caused by Arab Spring movement on heritage sites, drew attention to the emergence of a transition to more effective and/or actionable rules and regulations, the call for awareness raising and the significance of promoting ideas of place-attachment in heritage conservation. Furthermore, Sabina Favaro extended the discussion by introducing cartography and mapping as a way of promoting just and inclusive forms of urbanism

Urban segregation, gentrification, social mixing and the suburbs

This thematic track offered a plurality of cases, which were articulated around opposing concepts of marginalization and centralization, decline and regeneration, exclusion and inclusion. Carina Listeborn, a Professor in Urban Planning and Design at the Department of Urban Studies, Malmö University, Sweden, in her keynote drew on the Swedish experience of feminist movements and addressed the ways discourses about security have been used as an argument for exclusionary urban renewal projects. Further contributions addressed issues of gentrification from different perspectives: Gavin McLaughlin depicted state-led gentrification in a council housing district in London, whereas Catharina Thörn explored urban regeneration in postindustrial Gothenburg. Mohammad Sarraf focussed on mainstream assumptions of multiculturalism in planning, whereas Reyaneh Sadat Shojaei and Ohud Nu'mn Nabulsi tackled issues of segregation, identity, and gender equality in Tehran and Palestine. The palette of different urban contexts, cultures and institutional settings allowed for stimulating debate on both the potentialities and limits of mainstream (Western) urban theories, such as those on gentrification, neoliberal trends and multiculturalism

Conclusions

The discussion and exchanges shared during Cities that Talk will continue. At the end of the conference, some form(s) of consensus emerged among participants that planning systems, urban policies and strategies need to be rethought in relation to the local contexts of development, giving particular attention to the recognition of the diverse cultural and social identities present in a city and based on social and environmental justice, well-being and quality of life, coexistence and equal representation. New governance arrangements and technologies are needed, and these can 'act' as possible means to facilitate more democratic management of 'the public' in contemporary, culturally plural societies. The AESOP Young Academics will continue their cooperation discussions and debates on urban research and theory, developing an international view and contributing to the global debate.

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